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## **Christmas 2018**

(Letter n°57)

“The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness,  
on them light has shined.”  
(Is 9:2)

On 8 December 2018 in Oran (Algeria) 19 martyrs of the Catholic Church in Algeria were beatified: Brother Henri Vergès, Marist (1930-1994) ; Sister Paul-Hélène Saint-Raymond, Little Sister of the Assumption (1927-1994) ; Sister Esther Paniagua Alonso (1949-1994) and Sister Caridad Alvarez Martin (1933-1994), Augustinian Missionary Sisters ; Father Jean Chevillard (1925-1994), Father Alain Dieulangard (1919-1994), Father Christian Chessel (1958-1994), Father Charles Deckers (1924-1994), Missionaries of Africa ; Sister Angèle-Marie Littlejohn (1933-1995) and Sister Bibiane Leclercq (1930-1995), Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles ; Sister Odette Prévost (1932-1995), Little Sister of the Sacred Heart ; Father Christian de Chergé (1937-1996), Brother Luc Dochier (1914-1996), Father Christophe Lebreton (1950-1996), Brother Michel Fleury (1944-1996), Father Bruno Lemarchand (1930-1996), Father Célestin Ringard (1933-1996), Brother Paul Favre-Miville (1939-1996), Cistercian Monks ; Bishop Pierre Claverie, Dominican (1938-1996).

We invite you to discover a little about one of those newly blessed: Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran.

Pierre Claverie, OP, Bishop of Oran, was born in Algiers on May 8, 1938. After his formation as a Dominican in France, he returned to his native country as a priest in 1967. As the civil war that began in 1992 raged, death was Pierre's daily companion, and he took every reasonable precaution to avoid the fate of his Christian and Algerian friends who had been murdered in a ruthless and cruel manner. As Bishop of Oran he won the confidence and admiration of countless Algerians, and his fluent Arabic and deep knowledge of the Qur'an had prompted some of them to speak of him as their bishop too.

On Thursday, August 1, 1996, Pierre had reluctantly agreed to go to Algiers to meet the French foreign minister, Hervé de Charette, who was in Algeria offering support to a beleaguered government. That evening Pierre was anxious to return to Oran; he managed to secure a seat on the 9:30 p.m. flight as a result of a cancellation. When his flight landed, he was met at the airport by a twenty-two-year-old Muslim, Mohamed Bouchikhi, who was helping out at the diocesan center for a part of the summer. The time was 10:54 p.m. The police escort had just driven away when Mohamed and Pierre were flung violently into the air by a powerful explosion as they crossed the threshold of the bishop's house. Their blood was mingled in death.

Mohamed had become a friend of the priest in his hometown of Sidi-Bel-Abbes. He knew that he was risking his life by continuing to associate with Christians, but he knowingly put his life on the line for his friends. Pierre and Mohamed both accepted death rather than

give in to a culture of hate and distrust. The death of Pierre Claverie, like that of Jesus, wasn't a simple mishap, something peripheral to his life, but was the culmination of a life given to overcoming the forces of evil.

### Fidelity to a Relationship with God

Despite the fact that Pierre was a person of tremendous energy who loved traveling around his vast diocese to meet his tiny, scattered, and disparate flock, his first priority in the midst of a whirlwind of activity remained faithfulness to a life of prayer in community. His faithfulness to prayer, personal and communal, is described by his vicar general from 1990, Thierry Becker, who lived with him in the bishop's house. Pierre rose at 6:00 a.m. and was in the chapel by 6:30 a.m. At 7:15 a.m. they both sang Lauds. At midday he returned to the chapel, and at 12:15 p.m. all the diocesan staff and the sisters joined him there for prayer. He was back in the chapel at 6:30 p.m. to prepare for mass and vespers at 6:45 p.m. In this fidelity to prayer, Pierre found the nourishment he needed to remain faithful to his vocation of preaching the Word and of serving others with a listening heart. His immense activity – keeping an open door to all who dropped in to see him, never refusing an invitation to preach or to give a retreat, maintaining a vast network of friends both Christian and Muslim, and writing countless homilies and articles – all of this apostolic life was based on fidelity to his primary relationship with the God of Jesus Christ. His fruitfulness sprang from this relationship. His total dependence on God can be further seen in the simplicity of his lifestyle as bishop. He didn't have a personal bank account or check book. On his death his friends were surprised to see how little he possessed: a small room with nothing on the walls except a crucifix, an icon, and a photo of his parents. His clothing fitted into two small suitcases and he had few personal mementoes – a pectoral cross that he never wore and a dozen photos – that was it.

### Recognition of the Other

Complementing his love of God and springing from it was his insistence on the recognition of the other as other, "The emergence of the other, the recognition of the other, the adjustment to the other have become obsessions." This sensitivity to the uniqueness of each individual was the result of the shattering realization in his early twenties that he had totally ignored and failed to recognize the existence and identity of his Arab neighbors. He grew up in a working-class district of Algiers when the country was under French rule. Unlike the French who lived in the countryside or in small towns, he never had had any Arab friends. He wrote as bishop of Oran in 1990, "We weren't racist, just indifferent, ignoring the majority of the inhabitants of this country." As a Catholic, he marveled that his family could have been so indifferent to its Muslim neighbors: "Love one another... Yes. Love the Arabs also. Perhaps I had been told this but the context of my life didn't allow me to hear it. I have experienced great confusion and bitterness. It was possible to consider oneself a Christian and to be one in good faith... and not to hear, not to see beyond one's Christian frontiers, one's cocoon." The struggle against this tendency to ignore and exclude others who were of a different religion and/or culture became an evangelical imperative that inspired his immersion in the surrounding culture and his countless friendships. Through his mastery of Arabic he learned above all "to speak and understand the language of the heart," to discover a friendship that was deeper than any differences. "For I believe that this friendship comes from God and leads to God."

### A Christian Presence in Algeria

Why should the remnant of the Christian Church in Algeria remain in the country? They have practically no conversions and their numbers are tiny. Why risk one's life in such a situation? Is it not foolish and foolhardy to insist on remaining? In a letter to his friends at Christmas 1994, Pierre referred to the answer given by B. Lapize, SJ, to the same question. Their decision to stay with their suffering Algerian friends was similar to accompanying a very sick person: "I continue to be with you now that the party is over; I want to remain in

solidarity, I want to be present in your time of suffering. A useless presence, perhaps, but a gift of presence which indeed speaks of real love. Our presence speaks and gives nothing else except a witness of love. And that, for the bearers of the Gospel which we are, is the most precious message which we can transmit." The Christian community in Algeria lost all of its institutional resources and trappings of power with the nationalizations in 1976. Its only strength now lay, for Pierre, in the quality of its relationships with God and with other people.

(Martin Magee, *Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People*, Paulist Press, 2008, p. 107-113)



- ✠ From 12 to 20 July, Fr Mark-Ephrem was in the United States pursuing his work with the Monastery of the Holy Trinity.
- ✠ From 25 July to 5 August, Br Benoît was in France with his family.
- ✠ From 30 July to 1st August, Fr Mark-Ephrem was on a visit to our brothers in the Abbey of Bec (France). He was there again from 3 to 5 October.
- ✠ From 5 to 11 August, Fr Mark-Ephrem was with our confrères of the Benedictine Abbey of Ampleforth (England) where he had been invited to preach the community retreat.
- ✠ On 15 August, the feast of the Assumption, Bishop Philip Boyce, the Apostolic Administrator of our diocese, was present for Vespers.
- ✠ From 16 to 18 August, Br Thierry was in Belfast for a Conference organized by the Catholic and Protestant student Chaplaincies of Queen's University. He led a workshop on prayer.
- ✠ On 21 August, for the beginning of the World Meeting of Families in Dublin, all the religious of our diocese were invited to a Eucharistic celebration at Newry Cathedral. Fr Mark-Ephrem and Br Éric represented the community.
- ✠ On 25 August, Brs Thierry, Benoît and Joshua were in Dublin for the Festival of Families with Pope Francis.
- On the same day, Matthew Lenaghan made his secular oblation.
- ✠ On 31 August, Fr Mark-Ephrem and Br Éric were in the Anglican Cathedral of Downpatrick where Bishop Harold Miller, Anglican Bishop of Down and Dromore, and Bishop Noel Treanor, Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor, blessed a large Celtic cross.
- ✠ From 7 until 10 September, Bishop Toby Howarth, Anglican Bishop of Bradford (Suffragan of Leeds) was on retreat with us.
- ✠ On 10 September a further meeting of the on-going theological dialogue between the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Catholic Church in Ireland took place at the Monastery. Fr Mark-Ephrem was appointed by the Irish Episcopal Conference to be part of the Catholic delegation in this dialogue.
- ✠ From 11 to 14 September, we had a visit from Dom Mark Butlin, a Benedictine monk from Ampleforth and member of the international team of AIM (Alliance for International Monasticism).
- ✠ On 12 September, Br David-Joseph, from the Abbey of Bec, arrived with us for a period of discernment.
- ✠ On 16 September, Fr Mark-Ephrem preached at the Anglican Cathedral of Armagh.
- ✠ On 19 September, in Armagh, Father Mark-Ephrem took part in a meeting of Catholic bishops and those responsible for religious communities concerning the protection of minors and vulnerable persons.
- ✠ On 22 and 23 September, Dom Kevin Hayden, a Benedictine monk from Ampleforth, was with us on a short visit.
- ✠ On 23 September, Fr Mark-Ephrem was at the Anglican Cathedral of Armagh occupying his stall for Solemn Vespers for the 750 years of the cathedral's foundation.
- ✠ From 23 to 28 September, the nine seminarians of the diocese of Gozo (Malta) were on retreat in the monastery.
- ✠ On 29 and 30 September, we had the pleasure of welcoming Bishop Raymond Field, Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin. He was with us again from 27 to 29 October and from 25 to 26 November.

✠ On 6 October, we learned of the death of our English confrère Dom Benedict Heron aged 97. He had made his profession 71 years ago and was one of the founders of the community of Cockfosters (England) which is now closed. For several years he had lived in a retirement home in London. On 23 and 24 October, Fr Mark-Ephrem was in London and on the 24th he presided at the funeral, which took place in the church in Cockfosters.

✠ On 8 and 9 October, Fr Mark-Ephrem was in Donegal (Ireland) where Bishop Harold Miller had invited him to give a talk to the members of the Anglican clergy of the diocese of Down and Dromore.

✠ From 9 to 13 October, Br Joshua was at the Benedictine Abbey of Glenstal (Ireland). He took part in a session under the direction of Dom Columba Stewart, an American Benedictine monk. The session involved re-reading texts from the earlier monastic tradition and shedding light on their current relevance to spiritual and psychological discernment.

✠ On 22 October, we invited Fr Aidan McGrath, Provincial of the Franciscans in Ireland, who preached during the Eucharist.

✠ On 24 October, we were delighted to welcome M. Jean-Pierre Jouyet, the French ambassador in London, accompanied by Mrs Anissia Morel, legal adviser, and Mr François-Joseph Shichan, political adviser at the French embassy.

✠ From 25 October to 1st November, Fr Philip McShane, a Dominican from Dublin, preached us our community retreat.

✠ On 26 October, Bishop John McAreavey, our former bishop, was with us for the Eucharist and the meal afterwards.

✠ The Anglican church in Rostrevor had been closed for several months for substantial works of renovation and redecoration. On 28 October, the community participated in the building's rededication service.

✠ From 29 to 31 October, Br Thierry was in Corsica for the funeral of his great-aunt, Assunta Zavani, who had died on 26th aged 98.

✠ On 5 November, Fr Mark-Ephrem and Br Thierry flew to the monastery of Holy Trinity in Arizona (USA), which is now closed and where they met up with Dom Andrea Santus, the general bursar of our Benedictine Congregation. Br Thierry returned to Rostrevor on 15 November, while Fr Mark-Ephrem and Dom Andrea went to Brazil to visit our community in Ribeirão Preto.

✠ On 17 November we learn the news of the death of Sr Maureen McKinney, a Sister of Mercy, a life-long friend of the family of Fr Mark-Ephrem and of our community. On 20, Br Éric represented the community at her funeral which took place in Belfast.

✠ On 24 November, the delegation of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland engaged in dialogue with the Catholic Church in Ireland met once again at the Monastery to pursue their theological discussions.



God himself, none other, comes down to us  
to be with us in the "pit" in order to take us up.  
God gives his entire Self, holding nothing back, nothing whatsoever.  
His love for us is absolute.  
It falls to us to fix our minds and hearts on the Gift of God  
that is Jesus Christ our Lord,  
to make him the lodestar of our lives.

Ruth Burrows OCD



*Happy Christmas and Blessed New Year 2019*